



How children develop – 3 to 5 years

Development

Every child is an individual.

Every child develops at their own pace, usually through the same stages and milestones, and in the same order.

Children grow and learn continually, but not in a smooth flowing pattern. Sometimes they practise skills for quite a while and seem as if they will never move on. At other times they learn many skills very quickly.

This fact sheet is a general guide to child development. If you have any concerns about your child's development, seek advice from your child health nurse or doctor.

Physical development

Between three and five years, children's confidence grows as they start to explore and look for answers and reasons for everything in their world. They love being praised for trying and like to try everything themselves. Both three and four-year-olds are likely to be very active because they are trying to develop their running, climbing and balancing skills.

They need plenty of time outdoors to be able to do this. Although many children at four are experts at climbing, they will generally only attempt what they can manage safely. They still need supervision, however, as they sometimes can climb up an object and then are not able to get down without help. Children will start to engage in imaginary play, and pretend to be animals or fairies, or adults like mums or dads, teachers or doctors.

Language

The three-year-old is starting to enjoy conversations with adults as their language skills develop. They love to help and will discuss all sorts of things while doing so. You can give them added responsibility around the house, such as making a bed, putting dirty clothes in the washing basket, or putting toys away.

You can help children develop their language skills by:

- Talking to them about what they are doing
- Listening when they want to tell you about something
- Answering their 'endless' questions, but also allowing yourself and the family some quiet time
- Reading books to them and encouraging them also to 'read'. Joining the library is a good way to provide a wide variety of books for your child.

Your child's behaviour

As three-year-old children learn more language skills, they are keen to find out everything about the world, and show more interest in other people.

At this age, children usually:

- Show some sympathy towards others
- Understand how others feel
- Show affection towards younger children
- Want to please you.

Toilet training

Most children will be fully toilet trained during the day somewhere between two-and-a-half and four years, and nighttrained by eight years.

Try not to rush toilet training, and do not feel pressured into starting toilet training before your child is ready.

Signs of readiness include when children can:

- Say they are wet, or soiled, or need to go to the toilet.
- Wait, or can control the urge, to wet or soil.
- Show interest in the toilet.

To help your child learn how to use the toilet:

- Encourage them to drink lots of fluids.
- Let them watch you using the toilet.
- Use a potty or a toilet with a seat ring and a step.
- Explain the toileting steps – including washing hands afterwards.
- Encourage your child to sit on the toilet.
- Praise and reward your child for any successes.
- Stay calm if your child has an 'accident'. Toilet training takes time and practice.
- If toilet training doesn't seem to work, wait a few weeks before trying again.

For many children, night-time training is a separate event that takes place some time – even years – after day-time training. Don't take your child out of night-time nappies too soon. If they wake most mornings with a wet nappy, they're probably not ready.

Some tips for helping with night-time training:

- Make sure your child can get out of bed and easily remove their pyjamas. Help your child practise pulling them up and down.
- Talk about a night-time procedure. Should they go to the toilet by themselves, or wake you for help?
- Put a mattress protector on the mattress in case of accidents.
- Make going to the toilet the last part of their bedtime routine.
- Leave lights on so your child can easily find the toilet at night.
- If your child wakes during the night, ask them if they need to go to the toilet.
- Avoid pressuring your child, or comparing them to other children.

More information on toilet training is available from your child health nurse.

Your child and sleeping

Each child is an individual and will have their own sleep needs. Some seem to need a lot, and some need less. By the time they reach preschool, most children are sleeping 10-13 hours a night and have given up their day sleep.

Everyone has two main kinds of sleep – light sleep (when we dream) and deep sleep (when growing and healing takes place). Because children have more lighter sleep periods than adults, they may wake more during the night.

Common reasons for this include:

- They may be in a 'pattern' of waking up.
- They may be awakened by a noise during a lighter period of sleep.
- They may be uncomfortable.
- They may have pain, such as an earache.

Other causes can include separation anxiety from parents and picking up on worries and tensions within the family.



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Some tips to try to help your child sleep are:

- Have a set, relaxed evening routine. For example, have a bath, eat dinner, clean teeth, read a story, kisses goodnight, and go to sleep.
- Leaving a night light on, play soft music or leave the door open – these can all comfort a worried child.

Sleeping is a complex topic, and a child who does not sleep well can have a big impact on a family. If you are concerned, see your child health nurse or talk to your doctor.

Insecurity

Along with their newfound maturity, they can also show some of their insecurity at this age. They may:

- Whinge, demand and blame others for anything that goes wrong
- Be afraid of the dark, wild animals, or noisy machinery
- Overreact to the slightest injury
- Change from being shy one day to being a show-off the next day
- Have their feelings hurt very easily.

Excessive amounts of this behaviour can sometimes be a problem. If this is so, talk to your child health nurse or doctor about your child's behaviour. Your child health nurse can give you more tips, and can advise you whether there is a parenting program (such as Triple P) in your area.

Helping your child increase their resilience

Children of all ages experience difficulties in their lives at some point, but can be helped to not just survive problems but to 'bounce back' and be positive about life.

This is called resilience.

Being resilient is important because it is one of the keys to good mental health and can protect us from the stresses and challenges we all experience in life.

Being resilient will also help children make good decisions – especially as they reach adolescence.

Positive, protective factors to help your child be resilient include:

- Caring, supportive relationships
 - Developing resiliency starts right from birth. By having a strong, warm and loving bond with your child, you can give them the best possible chance to develop resiliency.
 - Encourage trusted family members and friends to play an important role in loving and supporting your child.
 - Take time to understand what's important to your child.
 - If possible, volunteer your time at your child's kindy or preschool.
 - Host regular play dates at your house for your children's friends.
- Positive environment
 - Provide a stable and harmonious home environment.
 - Let your child hear you praising them to other people.
- Opportunities to feel involved and important
 - Help your child develop positive coping skills and work out ways to resolve conflicts.
 - Show your child's artwork on the fridge or the wall.
 - Encourage your child to develop a sense of ethics, or moral obligation to others.
 - Help your child to use their spare time actively and constructively.
 - Always congratulate your child on an achievement.
 - Praise and reward them when they do something right, instead of only noticing when they do something wrong.

- Encourage your child to try new things and challenges.
- Help your child to develop a sense of humour.
- Teach them that it is OK to make mistakes, but that it's important to try again.

Everyone faces tough times at some point in their life, but it is how we react to difficult times that determines our pathways. Part of your job as a parent can be to teach your child by example how to deal with life's ups and downs.

More information

If you would like more information on your child's development or if you are concerned about your child, contact your local child health nurse.

You could also ask at your local library for books on child development.

Acknowledgement

This fact sheet is the result of input and effort from many health professionals in Queensland. Their help with the content is greatly appreciated.

To access the full set of fact sheets, go to <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/child&youth/factsheets>.